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ABSTRACT

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a school where administrators and teachers continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students and act on what they learn. PLCs are characterized by five dimensions: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. A school staff can evolve into a PLC by nurturing and developing each of these five dimensions. Although research has shown the benefits of schools becoming PLCs, what is missing are the answers to these questions: How is a PLC created? and What are the beginning actions schools can take to create a PLC? This issue reports on the efforts of the Strategies for Increasing School Success at Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to find answers to these questions through the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement project, a collaborative effort with 22 co-developers who represent higher educational faculty and researchers and staff from state education agencies, intermediate education agencies, local education agencies, and regional educational laboratory staff and consultants. This issue describes actions of co-developers and school personnel to initiate development of a PLC. (DFR)

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Launching Professional Learning Communities: Beginning Actions

ED 443 150

"Research suggests that society in general, and education in particular, could benefit substantially from efforts to transform impersonal, fragmented bureaucratic organizations into places where participants share goals and pursue a common agenda of activities through collaborative work that involves stable, personalized contact over a long term." (Newmann, 1991).

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is defined as a school in which the professionals (administrators and teachers) continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they learn (Hord, 1997). Hord adds that schools organized as PLCs are characterized by five dimensions: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Hord asserts that by nurturing and developing each of these five dimensions, a school staff can evolve into a learning community.

Research has shown the benefits of schools becoming professional learning communities, including those noted by Newman (1991) and Hord (1997). What is missing from the research literature, however, is the answer to these questions: How is a PLC created? What are the beginning actions schools can take to create a PLC?

The Strategies for Increasing School Success (SISS) Program at Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) is seeking answers to these questions through the Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement (CCCII) project, a collaborative effort with twenty-two Co-Developers. The Co-Developers represent higher education faculty and researchers and staff from state education agencies, intermediate education agencies, local education agencies, and regional education laboratory staff and consultants. These individuals are working at sites across SEDL's five-state region and the nation, to create Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement or, as it is more often referred to in the literature, a PLC. This paper describes actions of Co-Developers and school personnel in their early efforts to initiate development of a PLC.

SEDL's role has been to nurture, support, and provide guidance to the Co-

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Developers by preparing them for their work in the field and encouraging their efforts. SEDL staff have supported Co-Developers' work in the field by facilitating twice-a-year meetings at which Co-Developers can share their learning with each other. Another means of supporting their work has been through regular telephone and E-mail contact.

The schools selected by the Co-Developers vary in location, ethnicity, and grade level. Most of the schools are in the five-state region that SEDL serves: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Twelve of the schools have a majority Anglo population, six have a majority African-American population, and four have a majority Hispanic population. In thirteen of the schools, 50 percent or more of the students qualify as economically disadvantaged.

The Co-Developers reported in story form their interactions that specifically influenced the development of a PLC in their schools. The first installment of the story came after the Co-Developers had been in their schools for about five months. These stories described the initial steps that the Co-Developers took to enter the school and to negotiate beginning activities to create a PLC. The Co-Developers also documented actions that the school staff were already taking and structures that were already in place that were supporting the development of the five dimensions of a PLC.

The analysis that follows provides insight into actions taken by the Co-Developers, principals, and various teachers to begin creating a PLC at these school sites. The Co-Developers focused considerable time and attention in getting acquainted with the school — the staff, policies, norms, resources, and context in which the school exists. They also devoted time and attention to assessing the degree to which each of the five dimensions was evident in the school. Thereby, the Co-Developers gained important information about where to begin with the school. They learned where the staff was most receptive to change and how much they could influence staff.

Shared and Supportive Leadership

Studies reported by Hord (1997) reveal that principals in professional learning communities accept a collegial relationship with teachers, share power and decision making, and promote and nurture leadership development among the staff.

As Co-Developers began their work in schools, they assessed the leadership capacities of the principals and the staff. The Co-Developer stories about shared and supportive leadership were categorized in four areas: (1) acknowledging the larger context, (2) modeling shared and supportive leadership, (3) introducing the CCCII project to the professional staff, and (4) organizing for improvement.

Acknowledging the Larger Context

In most cases, Co-Developers made initial contacts with principals to explain the CCCII project and to share some of the professional literature on this subject with them. As they did so, Co-Developers directed considerable attention to assessing principals' perceptions of their leadership role within the larger context. They looked at how principals went about getting approval to join the project from the district and the school staff. They also assessed the degree to which principals were already sharing leadership with others in the school and how they were supporting teachers in carrying out leadership roles. The way principals went about doing this provided information about their ability to share

leadership.

In some instances, Co-Developers themselves were working within their schools as the principal or as district-level staff. These Co-Developers began the project with greater awareness of what would be required of themselves and the school staff, as well as the potential benefits of the project for their schools.

The two Co-Developer principals (who selected their own schools as their sites) both recognized the need to consult with the superintendent and inform the school board of their interest in joining the CCCII project. One Co-Developer principal noted:

> I had to present to the school board and give them information on what SEDL was and what the project was all about. There were some questions at the board meeting as to who/what [SEDL] was and how reputable they were. Naturally, our Superintendent gave full endorsement to the project and the organization's credentials. This allowed me to proceed with the project. (Co-Developer K)

Some principals, along with their Co-Developers, sought district approval before committing to the partnership and personally informed the school board of the project. In some cases, the response from the superintendent and the school board was enthusiastic; in other cases, it was neutral.

> At the following regular board meeting, we were put on the agenda. We had materials provided to the school board members and they were able to take a look at that and voted unanimously that the school would be allowed to accept the invitation to participate in this professional learning community project. (Co-Developer Q)

> The Superintendent arrived, listened politely, and asked a few questions about the project. It appeared that he was fulfilling an obligation, with little real interest in the implications of what we might learn. Soon after this meeting, he announced that he would be retiring. (Co-Developer E)

In a few cases, principals made unilateral decisions to join the project, without consulting the district or school staff. A Co-Developer noted an instance in which this occurred:

> One key comment when I said that they [the teachers] had chosen to become part of the project came from a teacher who said, "No, she [pointing to the principal] signed us up for this." (Co-Developer O)

In another case the principal advocated participation in the project. Once she had heard about the project, she sought the superintendent's approval to promote her school to be chosen. The principal then talked with the Co-Developer about the reasons her school would be the best choice for the project. The principal asked the Co-Developer to delay her decision about school selection until the Co-Developer could visit the school.

In essence, it appeared that principals who were contacted by the Co-Developers with regard to becoming participants in the CCCII project responded in a variety of ways to the proposal. These responses were dependent upon their previous experiences with shared and supportive leadership, their understanding of their role as leader, and current efforts to build the capacity of others within the school to share leadership. If the principals' previous experiences with shared leadership were positive, they responded well to this dimension. They saw it as fitting their philosophy of leadership and as a way to support its continuance.

Modeling Shared and Supportive Leadership

When Co-Developers approached the principals and, later, the whole staff of these schools, they made a special effort to communicate that joining the project was voluntary. By emphasizing this point, Co-Developers were modeling shared decisionmaking — inform the staff and let them decide.

Because of the hierarchical nature of most school districts, one Co-Developer who was a superintendent described the challenge he faced in convincing the principal of his willingness to develop a collegial relationship in the partnership. He was especially aware of the strong message that his own behavior conveyed about values and commitment to shared leadership.

> It is sometimes difficult to convey to the principal and faculty that you truly want their input as a professional and peer rather than as a subordinate. You may sometimes question whether or not the answer you get is one that is directed to you as a colleague or a boss. . . . As Superintendent, I will have to model the behavior which I wish the principal to model for his teachers. That means making decisions that are in the best interest of students. It also means continuously modeling the practice of shared leadership. (Co-Developer A)

In one case, the Co-Developer prepared the principal and the teacher for the board presentation and the subsequent presentation to the staff. The Co-Developer assisted by preparing materials for the principal and teacher to use in presentations. This active support demonstrated the collegial relationship she later wanted to instill at the campus level.

> [The principal] and [lead teacher] took responsibility for the board presentation, and I agreed to do the presentation to the staff with their support. We paged through the various pieces of information from our Austin meeting and selected what we thought would be priority items to share at this stage of the project with each group. (Co-Developer F)

Introducing the CCCII Project to the Professional Staff

The way the principals introduced the project to staff and obtained their approval demonstrated the principals' views and capacity to share leadership. Therefore, Co-Developers paid particular attention to the principals' method of doing this.

A large majority of principals consulted the campus leadership team or the whole staff before finalizing agreement to participate. In most cases, the principal asked the Co-Developer to be present and to take the lead or assist in providing information about the project. One Co-Developer principal described the way she introduced the idea to the staff at her school.

> I explained that I believe strongly in shared decisionmaking and would like for us to be a team. I could tell this staff would have to be convinced by actions — not words. (Co-Developer B)

Co-Developers who served in district office capacities were particularly attentive to framing the project as an opportunity for the campus and not as a directive from the central office. A number of them chose to have the lead teacher (selected by the principal) for the project assume a major role in sharing project information with colleagues. One Co-Developer who serves as district Curriculum Director described her approach.

> It was decided that this information [about the CCCII project] would be

> brought to the faculty by the [lead teacher]. We did not want this deemed as a project that was being introduced from the Central Office alone nor from the perspective of only the school principal. We believed that the teacher should serve a key role in introducing the concept. (Co-Developer C)

In one case the Co-Developer, principal, and lead teacher first presented the project to the campus leadership team, which then took the responsibility of presenting it to the entire staff.

In schools in which Co-Developers were external facilitators, most principals asked Co-Developers to help them present the project to the whole staff. One Co-Developer described her thoughts about presenting the project to the staff:

> The principal suggested that I return during the teacher planning time to share the information with her staff. She would ask the teachers to vote by secret ballot to make the decision on whether or not to participate in a professional learning community. . . . As I began to plan, I struggled with how I might "sell" the faculty on the benefits of participating in this project in the one hour that I had been provided. (Co-Developer D)

Organizing for Improvement

Co-Developers identified organizational structures that supported the staff in shared leadership through decisionmaking at their schools. Most schools had already created a decision-making body that included teacher representatives from all grade levels, the administration, and parent or community members to address schoolwide issues. Some of the schools had teacher input into schoolwide decisions via grade-level teams. In these cases, Co-Developers worked within the framework of the existing organization to continue to develop shared and supportive leadership.

In schools where organizational structures already existed for planning and implementing improvement initiatives, Co-Developers' attention was immediately directed to issues of staff concern. Some of those issues were low achievement scores, state or district mandates, etc.

> The school has a very effective process for solving campus problems, identifying needs, and planning strategies for improvement. . . . Areas for improvement are identified using a variety of data and feedback from multiple sources. . . . Once identified, the idea is presented to the total staff and dialogue takes place around the topic. The group decides if existing teams need to address the issues or if a new team needs to be created. Many teams are temporary in that they exist only to develop strategies around a particular issue, then dissolve again to the larger team. (Co-Developer G)

In other schools, these organizational structures were nonexistent or less well developed. Co-Developers at these sites helped principals form such structures and clarify new roles and responsibilities. One Co-Developer described the discussion with the principal and lead teacher on their return trip from a SEDL meeting:

> On the way back from Austin, the principal, lead teacher, and I planned in the car. During that time, we established an initial goal of having a leadership team with focus teams in place by the end of the first nine weeks. . . . We were in complete agreement as to who should compose that team. . . . In addition, we brainstormed the purpose and agenda and set a date for a first meeting. Later that week, we met during the lead teacher's planning period to firm up the agenda. (Co-Developer H)

Shared Values and Vision

Within professional learning

communities, a shared vision among the staff supports norms of behavior and guides decisions about teaching and learning in the school. A fundamental characteristic of the vision is an unwavering focus on student learning. Hord (1997) notes the importance of staff involvement in developing a shared vision, making decisions consistent with the vision, and promoting accountability for actions. The stories were categorized into three areas: (1) developing a formal vision, (2) building a commitment to change, and (3) identifying initiatives that are indicators of values.

In some cases, at the request of the school, the Co-Developers helped the school staff develop a vision. In other cases, Co-Developers did not immediately attend to the vision because the staff maintained that they already had a schoolwide vision in place and needed the Co-Developer to help them with what they perceived as a more pressing issue that the staff had identified. In these cases the Co-Developer focused on building a commitment to that issue.

Developing a Formal Vision

A small number of Co-Developers reported that formal processes had been used at their schools to examine shared values and create a shared vision. For the most part, it appeared that if this process had been employed at all, it had occurred before the Co-Developer began working with the school, and with varying degrees of genuine involvement by the whole staff and other stakeholders. There were, however, instances of awareness of the need to engage in the process.

The principal at one school expressed interest in having the Co-Developer lead the faculty in examining their shared values related to their work with students.

> The principal has suggested I might facilitate some "values clarification" strategies — in thinking about what we really believe as a faculty about kids and our jobs. (Co-Developer I)

One Co-Developer conducted a Search Conference method (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995) to develop a common vision. This approach was part of strategic planning with the staff. The principal of another school discussed the need to "revisit" the vision that had been developed some years ago in order to provide new staff members with the opportunity to have input and to check its congruence with middle school philosophy.

> [The principal] reasoned that the school's vision was something that those that were there from the beginning certainly bought into (it was OUR vision), but the newer staff needed to discuss that vision and have an opportunity to mold it to their own. She asked a middle school expert to present the middle school philosophy to the staff and to discuss young adolescent development. She then engaged the staff in a discussion of how well [the school's] current goals and procedures fit with this "vision" for our middle school. (Co-Developer J)

In another school, the Co-Developer, the principal, and the lead teacher discussed with the leadership team the need to develop a vision for their school.

> During a brainstorming session over concerns in the building, the leadership team identified such needs as establishing building norms (work ethic), establishing a culture of professionalism, and building trust and loyalty. Comments such as these were made during leadership team meetings: "We need a shared vision"; "We have to define what we believe so everyone has ownership"; "We need to do some goal setting"; "We need to define what binds us together as a faculty." (Co-Developer H)

Building Commitment to Change

Building commitment to change is closely

related to creating — and eventually achieving — a vision. Ideally, this commitment is communicated from the highest district level. Consequently, several Co-Developers and principals attempted to direct the attention of the school boards to the project, in order to communicate the potential it had for school improvement.

Co-Developers also recognized the value of the superintendents' being aware of the project. In fact, one Co-Developer selected her school site on the basis of what she knew about the values held by the superintendent. In some instances, Co-Developers found school boards and superintendents receptive to the project; in others, they discovered less awareness of or enthusiasm for professional learning communities and the impact they could have upon student learning. One Co-Developer, a district administrator, recognized the depth of commitment needed from both the district and the school to achieve the vision of a professional learning community. He expressed his concern about the district's and the school's commitment to take on such a project because he was aware of the degree of change it would require.

> The primary concern of those who had been involved in the district was that of time and energy. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the project concept was of value to the district. The main concern was if the project fit into the district focus at the time, and if it did, would it receive the necessary commitment from those involved. (Co-Developer H)

At the school level, several Co-Developers reported that a commitment to students was a part of the vision held by the staff and that this focus on students guided their decisions. One principal Co-Developer reported:

> The key ingredient is kids. Making things better for students to achieve and becoming true learners. The majority of the teachers possess this element, and I truly believe that the naysayers will respond under the pressure of positive nurturing conditions. (Co-Developer K)

Another Co-Developer described an interaction at his school with a veteran teacher that demonstrated the depth of commitment of some teachers toward improved student learning opportunities.

> He was pleased to share with me a list of names he viewed as truly dedicated teachers. These teachers, he said, worked hard for the children every day; they would never give up in the face of discouraging labels or any other threat to progress. While he spoke, his face showed deep concern, and he spoke in worried tones about the problem of inconsistent classroom management and discipline, but he had not faltered in his belief that the goal of a solid education for his students could be met. (Co-Developer L)

Identifying Initiatives That Are Indicators of Values

In some respects, school staff values were reflected in the improvement initiatives that schools chose to select. Creating a vision is distinct from selecting an improvement initiative. This, however, is the point at which a number of Co-Developers began working with their schools. For example, one Co-Developer principal reported that teachers felt that students should take more responsibility for completing their homework. As a result, they designed a noontime study session for those students who did not complete their home assignments. Reflected in this initiative to address the homework issue is a value for developing responsibility on the part of students.

Another Co-Developer guided the

staff to focus on increasing students' technology skills as an improvement initiative. This suggestion was made after listening to staff comments indicating the value of such skills for helping students grow into productive citizens. Reflected in this initiative is a vision of preparing students for the demands of the real world.

> I met with every academic team during their team planning time. The need to identify a schoolwide issue was used as the topic of discussion. . . . As the topics were introduced, I took notes on the general areas mentioned and periodically probed for a definition or example to assure my understanding. . . I made the case for the idea that technology could easily be used to address the vocational skills area. With the relevance of technology to today's teens, students' attitudes and motivation would likely be influenced in a positive direction with increased use of technology for teaching and learning. (Co-Developer F)

At another site, a process for identifying the school's focus led by the Co-Developer revealed the *individual* values held by teachers that had to be put aside in order to identify *shared* values.

> From our processing, the faculty's values came forward — *all* children learning and a focus on literacy. The teachers had worked together so long that it was hard to put some things aside. The staff was so used to leading themselves and they had begun to let personal values lead them instead of shared values. (Co-Developer N)

Collective Learning and Application of Learning

Research reveals that in learning communities, persons at all levels of a school work collaboratively to solve problems and improve learning opportunities. Together, they seek new knowledge and skills as well as ways to apply their new learning to their work. This collegial relationship produces creative and satisfactory solutions to problems, strengthens the bond between principals and teachers, and increases commitment to improvement efforts (Griffin, cited by Sergiovanni, 1994).

In this dimension, the entire staff (or a significant portion of it) comes together to learn about relevant issues that affect work with the students. Co-Developers reported that in each of their schools staff learning of some kind was occurring. Some schools were working with the entire staff and providing time to meet and learn. Other schools were working with the leadership teams, which met weekly to review and discuss schoolwide issues. However, few descriptions were provided of how or if this staff learning was actually being applied to instructional practices in the classroom. Instead, the Co-Developers reported the content of staff learning and the process of staff learning. They then used this information to guide their initial work with the school staff in this dimension.

The Content of Staff Learning

Co-Developers reported that most staff learning in schools related directly to curricular concerns. Several Co-Developers acknowledged the role of state and district mandates in determining what will be learned, initiating teacher dialogue about their work, and encouraging alternative instructional practices. New accountability standards often required schools to examine where their areas of success and lack of success were apparent in student achievement. Some principals used these standards to promote the need for re-examination of accepted practices. One Co-Developer reported:

> The state-mandated testing and accountability program has forced schools to re-examine what they are teaching, how they are teaching it, and how students are doing. Faculty members must cooperate and collaborate with each other in order to improve the curriculum, instruction, and ultimately student scores. (Co-Developer B)

In some cases the mandate was handed to staff with very little of the training needed to carry out the task. In one case the Co-Developer helped the school staff address the curricular requirements of the mandate:

> Here we have a group of teachers under the gun [due to low student achievement scores] back on the first day, and looking for an instructional strategy. . . aligned with brand new standards and benchmarks. What's more, the question included how might we write such a strategy in a district approved lesson plan format. At this point, I said something like, "I don't know if y'all are interested, but I just happen to have a little instructional strategy here in my pocket. It's aligned with six of the seven K-12 Language Arts content standards". . . . Swift consensus was noted by all. It is amazing how this can happen when given an assignment by the principal, with short time to comply. (Co-Developer L)

When training did occur, teachers were often expected to share what they learned with other staff upon their return to the school.

> The principal believes in sending her teachers to meetings and conferences so they will continually learn and then come back and implement what they learned and share with the faculty as a whole what they have learned. In other words, they will become their own staff developers. (Co-Developer M)

The Process of Staff Learning

Co-Developers identified the process the school staff used for learning. They determined if the entire staff was coming together to learn and, if not, who was coming together and how often. Understanding current practices would help the Co-Developers alter the learning environment to better reflect a PLC. Schools used a variety of ways to involve school staff.

Co-Developers sometimes used their own skills to help teachers interact with one another about the subject of their inquiry and learning. For example, one Co-Developer used dialogue as a means to share ideas, practices, and innovations implemented by peer teachers.

In several instances, printed or visual resources were used by the principal or Co-Developer to elicit discussion about their teachers' practice. One Co-Developer described the excitement that emerged from teacher involvement in a jigsaw activity on a reading selection about professional learning communities. She interpreted their response as a desire to continue learning together.

> To me, this spark of enthusiasm reflected a deeper fire within the teachers to learn and study together. (Co-Developer D)

The same Co-Developer then introduced the idea of faculty study by using a video on brain-based learning and constructivist teaching. By discussing the content of the video, the Co-Developer provided the teachers with an idea of what a faculty study "could be like."

Another Co-Developer used focus group interviews to identify themes for school improvement. Later, these themes were shared with the staff and used to initiate faculty study.

> Using the themes as a focus for faculty study, the group was introduced to the

whole-faculty study group process developed by Carlene Murphy. This model was selected because it provided the structure they missed during their work during the first semester. The focus group interviews refueled a frustration with how to study together. They expressed, "We need direction. Where is the structure?"

Several Co-Developers reported that they either helped design or simply participated in staff retreats away from the campus. In one case the school staff went on a weeklong science retreat together to be immersed in "hands-on" training in a real learning environment. The benefits of this experience extended beyond the learning they gained in the subject area; it also strengthened collegial and personal relationships.

> We carpooled, stayed in a dorm, ate meals together and were immersed in the various aspects of the K-5th-grade science curriculum. The staff gained a deeper understanding of the curriculum and each other. (Co-Developer O)

Supportive Conditions

Professional learning communities require two types of conditions that support a professional learning community — *structures and collegial relationships.* Structures include a variety of conditions such as size of the school, proximity of staff to one another, communication systems, and time and space for staff to meet and to examine current practice. Time for staff to meet is a crucial physical structure of a PLC.

Developing collegial relationships among the staff as they interact productively toward a goal is the second supportive condition. Collegial relationships include respect, trust, norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, and positive, caring relationships among students, teachers, and administrators. Co-Developer stories resulted in three categories of supportive conditions: (1) creating structures that promote and support change, (2) developing collegial relationships, and (3) developing external support and resources.

Creating Structures That Promote and Support PLC Creation

Co-Developers realized the need to have structures in place to promote and support the creation of a PLC. Co-Developers reported that grade-level teams, leadership councils, and other committee structures at some sites supported collective learning and decisionmaking among the school staff.

> I [Co-Developer] participated in two of the four class groupings, kindergarten and 4th grade. Each teacher came with an Academic Assessment Rubric completed on each of his or her students that covered every aspect [educational services, achievement data] of each child. . . . It was a lengthy process but when we were finished I felt that they had done an admirable job of placing every child in the best learning environment possible. I was impressed with the extent that every teacher on the grade level knew every child. (Co-Developer O)

In addition, regular and meaningful faculty meetings served as a vehicle to bring all the staff together to discuss issues of importance to student learning.

> The faculty meeting helped draw the teachers together into a shared sense of decisionmaking, purpose, and direction. The faculty began to discuss how all the "bits and pieces" were a unified whole which worked together to help the children. (Co-Developer N)

Communication is another type of structure that represents a supportive condition. Co-Developers reported ways in

which principals established communication systems at their schools.

> The principal had already instituted communication systems that help teachers know what is going on in the school and the larger educational community. For instance, she weekly publishes a Need-To-Know publication that alerts teachers to necessary tasks, recommended reading, and other information. Also there is a large white board in the hallway where teachers pass to get to their mailboxes and the coffeepot. On this board daily messages are posted by her and other staff members to inform staff of happenings. (Co-Developer E)

> When the principal arrived she began to notice that some things needed to be done. She proceeded to open the door to communication by holding faculty meetings and asking the staff what they would like to do and how they would like to do it. (Co-Developer N)

Making time available for teachers to reflect and study about student learning issues is a critical component of a PLC. Co-Developers reported that some schools had begun to address the time issue, and some had creatively "captured" time during the school day.

> The faculty has sufficient time available to them for collective learning — 2 days per month. One day is for a state-required faculty senate meetings. . . . The other day is for professional development. The use of time is controlled and determined by the school, not the central office administration. . . . In addition, the nine teachers in the lower grades have opportunity to meet before lunch and the six teachers in the upper grades have a similar time immediately after. (Co-Developer I)

> The school staff agreed to write a proposal for "banked time" in order to promote an infrastructure that would provide the time and place for the school's staff to meet regularly and frequently to collectively increase the school's capacity to support and insure student success. (Co-Developer P)

The importance of time was most frequently noted in schools that didn't have it for planning and shared decisionmaking. One Co-Developer described how the faculty at her site had used snatches of time to cover an array of school issues. Later, she lamented that convincing the school board of the value of time for teacher collaboration was likely to be a challenge.

> Negotiation of time is tricky because nobody in the decision-making roles of the school district feels that they have a way of providing time for teachers to work together. (Co-Developer Q)

> My concerns were and are focused on what the reaction of the school board will be when requests are made for additional planning time or for time for teachers to work together. The School Board will likely not respond positively to that, and I will need to do a considerable amount of work to convince them. (Co-Developer Q)

Another Co-Developer reported that lack of time for teachers to meet and collaborate about new strategies and their continuing work was a serious issue that limited their professional growth.

> The lack of time is deemed a condition that prohibits attempts to explore and expand. . . . This school year, the principal has initiated learning activities for the staff by providing professional articles to be read by the faculty members and to be discussed. Although there has been a fairly positive response to the articles, the dilemma occurs with constraints placed on the issue of time. (Co-Developer C)

At two sites, Co-Developers were helping schools to understand how to use available time effectively and to their advantage. Thus the issue at these schools was not the availability of time but rather the good and productive use of it.

> The teachers did not know what to do with their learning community time. As primarily sequential thinkers, this ambiguity was causing some concern and resentment. They would tell me: "Why should I come and stare at my colleagues when I could be working on my lessons?" The structure for collective learning was there, but the framework in which to work was not. (Co-Developer E)

Developing Collegial Relationships

Supportive conditions that help school staff interact productively and positively with one another as professional colleagues contribute to developing collegial relationships. Personal qualities of the principal were identified as being an important aspect of building such relationships among the school staff. Co-Developers noted when principals were warm and encouraging in their interactions with teachers.

> At the school, the principal had been leading the campus as a collaborative team for three years. . . . She assumed leadership from a principal who was also collaborative and innovative, and she has successfully continued that style with the support of teachers, students, and community. (Co-Developer G)

One Co-Developer reported on the principal's approaches to developing trusting relationships among teachers.

> In terms of respect and trust, the principal believes that she is working to increase the level of both. Her tactics include dealing with the teachers in an open and honest manner. She believes that it is important to 'call it as she sees it.' She has found that since her pattern has been to address classroom observations in a very direct manner and to note exactly what she is observing, the faculty feels that she is fair in her observations and addresses everyone on an equal plane. She hopes that this openness leads to a level of increased trust. (Co-Developer C))

Another Co-Developer reported on her role in helping staffs develop teamwork, trust, and consensus on goals.

> The principal wants me to do teambuilding activities so that the groups can learn to trust each other and work in an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration. (Co-Developer M)

Developing and Using External Support and Resources

Co-Developers were quick to note existing and potential resources that would support and advance their work at their school sites. One Co-Developer appealed to the superintendent to provide a half-day substitute for the lead teacher in the project to give the Co-Developer an opportunity to discuss the CCCII project with the teacher.

The two superintendent Co-Developers recognized that their positions provided them with quick and efficient access to resources. One saw her unique contribution as assisting the campus with data collection and in accessing other supportive conditions necessary to build a community of learners.

> With the direct involvement of the superintendent, a number of bureaucratic obstacles to the decision-making process are removed. The usual "red tape" of the routine process of getting additional funds appropriated and encumbered is substantially cut. Teacher requests for opportunities for additional professional development are greeted with an immediate and usually positive response. (Co-Developer A)

Co-Developers also noted that some principals used their positions to access needed resources to support the school. One principal Co-Developer described herself as a creative, resourceful person that has been known to solicit funds from whatever source is available.

> I have tapped into federal funds (legally), as well as private donations to fund activities for teachers and students. (Co-Developer K)

Another Co-Developer described the determination of the principal in acquiring needed resources for her school.

> Her perseverance in overcoming obstacles to get what she wants is a trait that brings resources to this school that might not be there otherwise. (Co-Developer E)

While acquisition of needed resources in the form of materials and equipment is important to schools that are in the process of becoming professional learning communities, it is also important to build connections with those outside the school who can support its endeavors. Parents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community partnerships thus become powerful resources for school improvement. Rather than making a broad sweep of available resources, however, one principal made judicious decisions about resources she wanted to tap. The Co-Developer described this more discretionary approach to accessing resources used by the assistant principal.

> She is particular about resources in the sense that she doesn't go after just anything and everything, but at the same time she is always open to new possibilities. She does attempt to target her energy and time to those resources that can be most helpful to the school. She thinks of everything—from the back-to-school partner to local politicians. She will talk to whomever she needs to in order to move the school forward. (Co-Developer Q)

Shared Personal Practice

Research indicates that teacher interaction within a formalized structure for collegial coaching is a powerful contributor to professional learning communities. In such interactions, teachers may visit other teachers' classrooms on a regular basis to provide encouragement and feedback on new instructional practices. As "peers helping peers" (Hord, 1997), teachers build a culture of mutual respect and trustworthiness for both personal and total school improvement.

Shared personal practice is often the last dimension to be developed. It is relatively uncommon for school staff to share their classroom practice with their peers in a formalized setting with the intent to improve and change their own classroom practice. It is more common for school staff to informally share successes, frustrations, and solutions with their colleagues. The Co-Developers' stories provided few instances in which teachers in their schools were using formalized procedures for this purpose. The Co-Developer stories were categorized into two areas: (1) prerequisites for professional sharing, and (2) determining ways to share.

Prerequisites for Professional Sharing

The fact that this dimension is usually the last to develop indicates that pre-existing conditions need to be in place before school staffs can be expected to share what is traditionally the private domain of teachers — their instructional practices. Co-Developers recognized that teachers had to have a high degree of trust before engaging in reflective discussion of their

personal practices. Although some teachers may value the opinions of their colleagues and may accept the benefit that this practice would have for professional growth, examining personal practice is perceived as a risky undertaking.

In one instance, a Co-Developer acknowledged the necessity of this pre-existing relationship and the need to build a foundation of trust before addressing this dimension significantly.

> The initial discussion of shared practice was very tentative. While a few of the leadership team members expressed a need for this, they also stated that this happened rarely within the school culture. The leadership team believed that more trust and collaboration would have to be built before moving into this attribute. (Co-Developer H)

Determining Ways to Share

Co-Developers reported that principals play an important role in establishing expectations for shared personal practice. At one site, the Co-Developer observed the principal encouraging this practice by suggesting a variety of ways in which it could be done.

> The principal was encouraging teachers to observe in one another's classes and video themselves, to be reflective, and to look at action research as a way to improve classroom practice and student outcomes. (Co-Developer I)

At another site, teachers were beginning to recognize the value of visiting other classrooms.

> Teachers give informal/formal feedback when they see others "on the right track." Visiting between classes occurs, i.e., second grade teachers visiting third grade classes. Teachers would like to see more sharing between fifth and sixth grade classes and believe that it should be more than a "one-day shot." New teachers are allowed to visit each grade level to find their "niche" in the organization. (Co-Developer S)

Conclusion

This paper has identified themes that describe actions taken at schools to develop professional learning communities. It was clear that for the majority of the Co-Developers, the first half-year of work with the schools has been devoted not to implementing change but to becoming acquainted with the school staff and understanding their present way of operating. Co-Developers identified special strengths of individuals who had the potential to play important roles in helping a school become a professional learning community. They were particularly cognizant of the principal's leadership qualities and the extent to which leadership was shared among others in the school.

In addition, Co-Developers were gaining a sense of the resources currently available to the school and the degree to which teachers were committed to learning more about their practice. They were also trying to develop positive relationships with the principals with whom they had formed a partnership and with the school staff as a whole. Since all of these strategies produce little in the way of actions on the part of the Co-Developers in their role as facilitators of change, their reports of what they *did* are notably slim. The reports of Co-Developer principals were richer in description of actions, it is assumed, because they were already familiar with their schools and committed to the dimensions of a PLC.

Within the stories, however, several actions taken by the Co-Developers seemed particularly compelling. First, Co-Developers who were at the campus frequently and personally involved from the very beginning in something that the school was doing or wanted to do, as opposed to

taking a spectator role, seemed to be more actively engaged, *doing* more. For example, one Co-Developer invited faculty to participate in a team-building activity at her residence at the beginning of the school year. Her planning and involvement in these activities helped her to be accepted as a facilitator for the school's desired goals. Another Co-Developer assisted the principal and the lead teacher in preparing their presentation about professional learning communities for the school board. Her contribution in developing and presenting the visual materials and in presenting the project to the school staff modeled shared and supportive leadership and was appreciated by the principal. These actions helped characterize the Co-Developer in the eyes of the administration and staff as an advocate and a resource for the school.

Second, some Co-Developers developed strategies that enabled school staffs to plan together or to talk with one another about their work. Working directly with teachers rather than only with or through the administration seems to communicate that the Co-Developer is willing to get at the "heart" of school change. In some cases, Co-Developers offered processes to bring teachers together to discuss issues of concern at their campuses. In other cases, Co-Developers agreed to study and learn about new practices alongside teachers. This suggests that creating a professional learning community requires change facilitators "to get down in the trenches" with teachers and to struggle with them in whatever they are trying to do differently.

Third, knowing how to bring a school's existing disjointed and poorly articulated efforts into alignment (wherever possible) was an important contribution that some Co-Developers made, especially at the beginning of the improvement process. Co-Developers who served in this "sense-making" role helped to clarify ways in which the staff's actions supported values to which they were committed. This role also helped the principal and staff to maintain their focus upon what they believed to be important, to identify resources that could help them achieve their goals, and to reduce distractions that would get them off course. In these ways Co-Developers supported the staff's evolving and continuing commitment to the change effort they were developing.

This analysis of Co-Developers' initial actions and interactions with their schools offers insight into beginning steps that others can take to help schools become PLCs. Although each school context is unique, with different resources and needs, and requires different approaches from those who facilitate change, it is apparent that some strategies seem to be particularly compelling in influencing change. Ongoing study of Co-Developer actions at sites participating in the CCCII project at SEDL will provide further information about how to create schools as professional learning communities.

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